

## National amnesia

Novelist and political essayist Gore Vidal on Bush as a corporate puppet, the failure of the media and our loss of a collective memory

By Dean Kuipers



Illustration by Scott Gandell

Gore Vidal has been watching American political life for a long time and is liking less and less of what he sees. Born to deep political connections including the Gore and Kennedy clans, Vidal's early series of eight novels, including his debut, "Williwaw" (1946), and "The City and the Pillar" (1948), established him as a major young post-World War II novelist alongside Norman Mailer and Truman Capote. He ran for both the House and the Senate, but it was his National Book Award-winning 1993 tome, "United States: Essays, 1952-1992," that established him as one of this country's most authoritative political commentators on subjects from American dynasties, homosexuality, artists and intelligentsia.

More recently, he has savaged George W. Bush as a transparent corporate shill and an accomplice in a grand betrayal of the polity in a barrage of essays including his 2004 collection, "Imperial America: Reflections on the United States of Amnesia."

**PW: Do you think that it's possible the Bush Administration went into Iraq really believing that it was spreading democracy to the Middle East?**

**Gore Vidal:** Of course not. Why should they do anything like that? They go in out of greed. There's been very little altruism in all of our history. We go into things for profit, and now that we've ceased to be any form of democracy, the people are not consulted about what their rulers want them to do. No war has been declared by that part of the legislative branch which is most democratic, that is most responsive to the people.

**So, it was just about oil and war profiteering?**

Yes. Meanwhile, we do not have a media that enlightens anybody about anything, and our public school system for the average person is pretty bad. We are quite uninformed about things. Therefore we are not in any position to make up our minds if they're making good policy or a bad policy. First of all, no one will ask us what we think. And then if they say, "Oh, go to the polls," we go to the polls and the election is stolen as in Florida 2000 and 2004 in Ohio.

**Do you think that the media is failing in this capacity?**

Get the tense right: It has failed.

**Has this president made this worse, by being so antagonistic to the media?**

Oh, who cares? He doesn't run the country, a handful of corporations run it. No, this is not conspiracy theory, this is conspiracy analysis. The country is very tightly led with corporate goals which push out anything of a national nature. We're out of it. It's like being in a bubble. I've spent a great deal of my life living across the water, and someone said, "How can you follow American politics when you've had your house in Italy for all those years?" And I said, "Well, that's the only way I can find out what's going on in America, because the foreign press, at least in Western Europe, is quite good."

**Corporate influence in politics seems more raw and apparent now than ever before.**

Of course it is. And it was all due to the "good luck" -- those two words I have just used ironically -- of 9/11. "I'm a wartime president! I'm a wartime president!" Well, he fucking well isn't. He's an accidental president. He happens to be put in by the oil and gas people to cut their taxes and then go in for preemptive wars against countries that are weak and that have done us no harm, like Afghanistan and Iraq. This was a godsend for those who would like to get rid of Congress and the courts and the Constitution. And they're doing very well at it -- very, very well. "Mission accomplished," I believe, is what he said on the aircraft carrier.

**Do you think that those effects are lasting, or can they be reversed?**

Well, is the glass half full or half empty? I think the damage done to our system by the last 20 years -- of which he's just the most ludicrous example -- is probably

irreparable. We may not have time enough to restore the republic. We just lost it. I mean, when the attorney general of the United States goes before Congress and just says the president can pick and choose what he wants to do, and that his wartime powers are inherent – well, if that dumb–dumb Gonzales has ever read the Constitution, he knows that there are no inherent presidential rights, they are enumerated in the Constitution; they're named. And there's a great many things he cannot do. For one, he can't go eavesdropping without getting a court order — that's the law.

**Has our foreign policy stance also been permanently damaged?**

I would say nothing is ultimately irreparable, but the Constitution, as we have enjoyed it over the years and as it has sustained us, has been given some death blows. Now everyone is in the habit of seeing people shoot each other, police shoot children, children kill each other, I mean, this is a mess. And how do you start to repair it? That's a real problem for a real political party. Unfortunately, we don't have them at the moment.

**Do you have a prescription for achieving that?**

It's a tall order, but we have to undertake it, like it or not. A presidential election costs some money, but there're a lot of rich people on the left, or on the side of the Constitution, to hold a true election. Skip the states and just set up balloting machinery around the country. I'd go back to the old–fashioned written ballots, which leave a paper trail, and just go all–out to try and do an honest one. You might have very, very different names at the end of the day. This would cause hysteria and, God knows, bloodshed and whatever by those who don't really want an honest election, but at least we might know what was out there.

**[Former UN weapons inspector] Scott Ritter's information seems like vitally important stuff. Is the country too polarized to listen?**

They're not used to hearing anything. The only art form that the United States ever developed is the TV commercial. That's our Sistine Chapel. That's our masterpiece. That's a very rare art form, but it's not very informative. Now you've got to get away from advertising. Just through sheer repetition, which is the secret of advertising, these two fools in office have convinced the American people, these 60, 70 percent, that [Saddam Hussein] was responsible for 9/11. He didn't have anything to do with 9/11. No, I don't think he was a nice man and I don't care – he's an Iraqi and I'm an American. We Americans should not worry about Iraqi leaders.

**Now Iraq is teetering on the brink of civil war. Is it a good idea to pull the troops out?**

I would pull them out before they're killed, yes. We have nothing to gain by being there. We have no plans to develop the country, repair the country, or even to give them their oil back. We're gonna plunder and go, so plunder and get out before our people get killed.

**That's a pretty grim picture. Do you still enjoy bringing this news to the people?**

I don't think enjoy is the correct verb, but I feel one has to do it. You know I was brought up in the '30s; I remember Hitler, I remember American fascism, which was fairly lively. If you don't speak out, things just die and shut down. We're going to have no national memory of anything, and if you are not informed about your past, you have no present. And God help you in the future.

Lurking in there somewhere is a message of hope.

I think there is. There's a moment when things get so bad that people do act. But one certainly doesn't want to wait for a revolution. I'm all for evolution, and we're ready for some.